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ABSTRACT

Humanistic adult educational methods and traditional Aboriginal approaches have areas of commonality that can lead to an enhanced understanding of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives among undergraduate social work students in Canada. Humanistic adult education and andragogical principles foster self-directed learning among learners. Individual and group experiential learning situations that are promoted by traditional Aboriginal teachers also allow for self-directed learning and incorporate the values of noninterference, noncompetitiveness, sharing, and a sense of personal and community responsibility. Two social work courses were developed in which traditional Aboriginal approaches as well as humanistic adult educational methods were employed. The teaching and learning approaches and methods that were used to blend the two philosophical orientations were sharing circles, voluntary participation in ceremonies, group learning experience, interaction with Aboriginal role models, and the inclusion of Elders and their knowledge and experiences in the group settings. The inclusion of Aboriginal role models enhanced the students' understanding of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives and enhanced the self-esteem of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The blending of the two ideologies and methodologies led to development of grading methods that met the identified objectives of the mainstream institution. Questions and ethical implications concerning the further incorporation of Aboriginal teaching approaches into mainstream education are discussed. Contains 29 references. (TD)

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Integrating Traditional Aboriginal Teaching and Learning Approaches in Post-Secondary Settings

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Educational practice is rooted in various aspects of educational philosophy. Adult educators who are able to identify and apply a personal philosophy have a deeper understanding of the principles and practices of adult education (Hiemstra 1988, Knowles 1980, Selman 1991).

While I was researching for my thesis I identified that on a personal and professional level I have used a blend of traditional Aboriginal learning and teaching methods in conjunction with humanistic adult educational principles and methods which arose from these philosophical belief systems. This paper presents a synopsis of the principles and methods that I used while attempting to integrate them in a post-secondary setting.

Bridging Concepts

Important links between traditional Aboriginal teaching and learning approaches and humanistic adult education are found in co-operative learning concepts and the inclusion of affective factors in the learning experience. Patterson (1973), Bopp *et al.* (1988), and Lane (1992) discuss the importance of the learner's involvement in the learning experience being coupled with the inclusion of the emotions as a way of enhancing the learning experience.

Other principles which were primary guiding factors in my endeavors to bridge and integrate the philosophies are: freedom, trust, self-directed learning, autonomy, participation and co-operation. While I focus primarily on Aboriginal philosophies and practices I include aspects of humanistic adult education.

Philosophical Foundations of Traditional Aboriginal Education

A number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adult educators and authors have extracted some of the important philosophical perspectives common to many Aboriginal peoples. These educators and authors include: Absalon 1993, Armstrong 1987, Bopp *et al.* 1992, Bopp *et al.* 1988, Bopp *et al.* 1984, Brandt 1990, Charter *et al.* 1993, Clarkson *et al.*

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1991, Indian Tribes of Manitoba 1971, Jordan 1986, Minor 1992, National Indian Brotherhood 1984, 1988, O'Brien and Pace 1988, Sealy and Kirkness 1973, and Tobias 1988.

Here I present some of these common ideas, most of which have been identified by at least several of the authors listed above. Where the idea may be particularly relevant to the research of one or only a few of the authors, I identify who espouses that perspective; otherwise I present the perspectives in a narrative with few interruptive citations.

The foundations of Aboriginal education arise from the diverse philosophical perspectives of Indigenous nations. Although identifying commonly held beliefs of diverse nations presents a danger of re-enforcing existing stereotypes (Hamilton and Sinclair 1991), outlining some of the common themes among Aboriginal peoples' philosophies is useful.

Hamilton and Sinclair (1991) and Brandt (1990) identify the cultural imperatives of non-interference, non-competitiveness, sharing, and emotional restraint as among the primary principles of Aboriginal peoples. They stress that these values may be expressed in different ways by different Aboriginal nations.

Darou (1987) cites commonly held values of Aboriginal peoples as: co-operation, concreteness, non-interference, respect for elders and for the land as animate. He also cautions against generalizations with respect to values when it comes to Aboriginal peoples.

Charter *et al.* (1993) and Couture (1987) agree with the need for consideration, understanding, and the application of Aboriginal principles and values by adult educators. They reinforce the need for caution when applying Aboriginal imperatives to individuals or specific groups by stating that the awareness of values and principles will provide a *broad conceptual base* from which to work. Couture states: 'these values are the roots to a number of characteristic behaviors, the understanding of which must be regarded as essential to educational planning and development' (p. 182). Based on these traditional Aboriginal principles and values, Aboriginal peoples have employed some distinct teaching and learning principles.

Aboriginal education is perceived as a whole-life experience; it encompasses all facets of a person's life, community, and society. Education should prepare people for total living and the advancement, development, and improvement of individual and community life. Included in this development are languages, values, customs, culture, politics, economics and spirituality.

Armstrong (1987) identifies the process of Aboriginal education as an integral factor in everyday living within the family or clan; education is integrated into daily experience throughout life. She cautions educators to be aware of the danger of separating learning from Indigenous philosophies. These concepts are inextricably interwoven with the traditional Aboriginal values of non-interference, non-competitiveness and sharing.

Bopp *et al.* (1992) state:

> Learning is a transformational action that can lead us to internalize more life-preserving, life-enhancing habits. Learning can mean acquiring new knowledge, new attitudes and values, new behaviors, actions, and most importantly, a new perspective for interpreting meaning and purpose (p. 5).

Fundamental to Aboriginal teaching philosophy is the concept that each person in turn is both a teacher and a student. All persons in their lifetime must pass through four basic stages of development (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and maturity) and in each stage there are specific learning tasks that need to be mastered. Life transitions are linked to seasons where there are observable transitions that can be connected to daily living. The life cycle is apparent through the reproductive, birth and death cycles of plants and animals.

Traditional Aboriginal peoples acknowledge everyone and everything that exists as a potential teacher. Every person has knowledge. An example of this would be a child teaching an adult how to play, laugh, or intently concentrate while learning a new task. Children, adolescents, adults, and elders can share new methods or concepts with each other by listening to the experiences of others or by observing, assessing, questioning, and testing new approaches. Observation and close scrutiny of the environment lead to learning experiences; for example the development of patience may be linked to a rock and its exposure to the elements.

Knowledge is meant to be shared — not owned and not imposed. It is expected that information or skills will be shared and given freely — if asked for. Advice is not normally offered unless it is requested because this would conflict with the value of non-interference and the individual's life choices and independence. Among some Aboriginal peoples it is considered improper to proffer either advice or instruction.

Individuals are acknowledged for their experiences and their knowledge. Elders are respected for their accumulation of knowledge and wisdom. However, an individual does not have to be elderly to be wise. Wisdom is acknowledged in all ages. This affirms individuals and enhances self-esteem among the learners and teachers of all ages.

All learning experiences have value. If a learning experience is not successful it is not considered to be a failure. What is important is that which can be learned from the experience or the experience itself. Frequently, humor is used when a task is not successful. Humor distances the individual from the experience and allows for new learning experiences.

The individual is an extension of the community and their knowledge and experiences may be used for the betterment of the community. The sharing of information leads into another important value, that of co-operation. The free exchange of ideas discourages competitiveness.

Traditional Aboriginal peoples identify and accept the fact that people cannot teach what they have not experienced and do not understand. further, there is no shame associated with not having expertise in all areas of life. It is acceptable to have one or several skill areas and to be competent at those. All persons learn according to their specific needs at a particular time. This learning is linked to their previous history of learning and is influenced by their experiences or the needs of their families or communities.

Making Connections and Integrating the Learning Concepts

The vehicle that I used to make connections and integrate the learning concepts was the teaching of two sections of a course in social work practice with undergraduate social work students. The course was entitled 'Social work Practice and Aboriginal Peoples' at the University of Manitoba Faculty of Social Work. The courses were taught one year apart and each course was of 13 weeks duration.

As a result of my research, application of specific learning principles, reflection on the process and methodologies, and subsequent modification of methods for the second course, I was able to blend and integrate traditional Aboriginal teaching/learning approaches with humanistic adult education principles.

My personal teaching and learning styles became more apparent which confirmed the principle that one cannot teach what one does not know or understand. I recognized my learning as a whole life experience. I also recognized the responsibility of the learners to themselves and to humanity in general.

I was able to observe the influence of the group on an individual's learning experiences and the influence of the individual on the learning of the group. This indicated to me that an individual could respond to their community's needs. A result of the course assignments, which were determined to meet the learning needs of the individuals, there was minimal competition and a free exchange of information and skills. The inclusion of elders and other Aboriginal community role models enhanced the learning experiences of all of the group members and validated the teaching and learning experiences for everyone.

Elias and Merriam's (1980) definition of humanistic adult education includes the development of persons who are open to change and continued learning, who strive for self-actualization, and who can live together as fully functioning individuals — wherein the focus is upon the learner rather than the body of information. This definition is closely aligned with Aboriginal beliefs explained by Bopp *et al.* (1988) in that the mind, body, and spirit are included in the total learning experience.

In my efforts to facilitate an enhanced learning experience I consciously attempted to meet some of the goals of humanistic adult education, and some of the objectives of traditional Aboriginal teachings. My primary purpose was to blend the two approaches and integrate them in a post-secondary setting.

Teaching and Learning Approaches and Methods

The teaching and learning approaches and methods that I used to blend these two philosophical orientations were sharing circles, voluntary participation in ceremonies, group learning experiences, interaction with Aboriginal role models other than myself, and the inclusion of Elders and the incorporation of their knowledge and experiences in the group settings.

I allowed for individual learning and development by using as many mainstream learning methods as I could. For example, video tapes, field trips, mini-lectures, assigned related readings, learning journals, guest speakers, and structured learning experiences.

In the second course I altered assignments and included article critiques and annotated bibliographies and deleted journal writing. The article critiques and annotated bibliographies were areas where the students could choose the topic areas to be researched, according to their individual interest areas and field placements, as they related to social work practice by or with Aboriginal peoples.

As a result of the blend of methods, one of the students said that she would continue to "learn for the rest of her life." Other students stated that they were able to apply that knowledge to their individual lives, their family lives, and their professional lives. Yet other students commented that they were able to use methods from the classroom to discipline their children without guilt and to apply new awarenesses to the clients that

they were working with; they also reported that they had deeper understandings of their own values, biases, and strengths as social workers.

In both courses the students felt safe enough to express their emotions by either crying or laughing freely. The level of trust, however, had to be established first. I was able to detect that the level of trust in the classroom increased as I became more proficient in using humanistic methods and gained confidence in my application and integration of traditional Aboriginal methods. I fostered that trust by not making judgmental statements and by eliciting honest feedback from the group members. I learned to leave the room during some group learning activities. I also learned to admit when I did not have answers to questions and when I made mistakes in the classroom. Students responded by mentioning that they felt validated, trusted and appreciated. Students said that the classroom felt safe and that it was a place where real learning happened.

The linking of the humanistic adult educational concepts and the traditional Aboriginal teaching approaches has led to a positive learning experience for the majority of students and for myself. However, I attribute the success of my learning and that of the students to my acceptance of the wisdom of others.

My Acceptance of the Wisdom of Others

Fortunately, I was able to draw upon the teaching and learning experiences of other adult educators who were interested in developing culturally sensitive materials and methods. Also, I was able to draw upon the wisdom of the Aboriginal Elders. In this section I identify and discuss several concepts which proved to be useful in my learning as well as in the development and application of the two courses I delivered.

O'Brien and Pace's (1988) work was directly related to Aboriginal people and a social work program in a post-secondary setting. They credit adult education principles, Freierian precepts, and the involvement of Aboriginal students and community members as important components which led to the success of their program.

Although my project was different, I, too, applied adult educational principles in a formal classroom setting, and included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, community members, and social workers in the planning and delivery of the projects. I discovered that this combination of principles, methods, and people enhanced the learning experience for the students in the courses. As a result of the evaluative comments by the students in the first course, I was able to modify the methods and include Elders in the second course. After the second course, the students suggested that Elders be included in more classes because of the Elders' approach to sharing teachings and facilitating learning. Clarkson *et al.* (1991) and Darou (1987) concur with the need for recognition of the wisdom of the Elders and the need to incorporate the teachings of the Elders in teaching and learning situations since they are an integral component of daily life and learning.

Although I was not in a position to utilize community members in the same context as O'Brien and Pace (1988) I actively sought information and feedback from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, colleagues, community members, and practising social workers in an effort to ensure community input and assessment of what I was attempting to do. I found that the active seeking out of the Elders and my participation in ceremonies provided me with new perspectives that I was able to apply directly and with the desired effect of enhancing both the students' and my learning experiences.

Sawyer and Green (1984, 1991) discuss how experiential learning and structured experiences can facilitate an enhanced cross-cultural or culturally sensitive learning experience in adult educational settings. I included in the course an activity based on students' feelings and personal experiences with stereotyping. This led to the students' acknowledgment of their biases and negative attitudes towards others. These awarenesses were then applied to their understanding of social work principles and Aboriginal peoples. Students identified that they had stereotypical attitudes about Aboriginal people. They were then able to challenge those stereotypes — for example, during visits to an Aboriginal social service agency and with Aboriginal role models and Elders in the classes. Student responses in the sharing circles, in class presentations, and on the written evaluation forms indicated that they changed their stereotyped attitudes as a result of those experiences.

Similarly, Fiddler (1990) credits the inclusion of Elders on faculty, Aboriginal faculty members, and the cultural camp component of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College as critical elements leading to the graduation of Aboriginal social work students from the college. He identifies the element of positive self-esteem and a strong cultural self-identity as necessary to the successful completion of the social work program.

In this study the inclusion of Aboriginal role models in the courses not only enhanced the students' understanding of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives, it served to enhance the self-esteem of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. For example, when the Elders thanked the students for their sharing of knowledge in the circle one of the students began to cry. She said that she felt validated as a person for the first time in her university career. Her remarks triggered similar responses from others in the circle. I was astounded that these adult learners had never been acknowledged for their wisdom or experiences. As a result of that incident I began to regularly convey my appreciation of what students shared in the classroom.

My acceptance of the students' experiences led to greater trust and sharing of information and a breakdown of reluctance to discuss failures or mistakes by the students and me. The importance of reciprocity and respect in learning situations are discussed by Brookfield (1986), Charter *et al.* (1993), and Hamilton and Sinclair (1991).

Summary

This study was undertaken in order to enable me to learn how to become a better facilitator of students' learning about Aboriginal peoples' perspectives. Much of the adult educational literature emphasizes a humanistic philosophy, in which the focus is on the learner and on choosing from a diversity of methods for facilitating in the learner an interest in the subject, both its content and its context. The diversity of methodologies allows an educator to be flexible. However, the literature emphasizes that an educator should also develop a personal philosophical approach. Some Aboriginal learning literature provides insight into the similarities between humanistic adult education and traditional Aboriginal teaching methods — such as non-competitiveness, experiential learning, and learning to solve a problem or satisfy a need.

To a large extent my learning was experiential and reflective. I pursued learning about Aboriginal teaching methods by participating in Aboriginal ceremonies and in consultations with Aboriginal Elders. I pursued learning about facilitative processes by developing and delivering two courses in which I consciously applied traditional Aboriginal approaches as well as humanistic adult educational methods. Two important

facilitation methods I undertook were sharing circles in the classroom and bringing Aboriginal Elders into the classroom as resource persons.

Conclusion

I believe these conclusions, although drawn only from two studies, may have relevance for other adult educators seeking to learn ways for improving their facilitation of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives among their students *via* the integration of traditional Aboriginal teaching methods and humanistic adult education principles.

It is important to identify a personal and professional ideology, because defining one's ideologies promotes an enhancement of one's own and other people's philosophical beliefs and practices. Further, that identification leads to a heightened awareness of one's own and other peoples' values, beliefs, and biases.

Humanistic adult educational methods and traditional Aboriginal approaches have areas of commonalty that can lead to an enhanced understanding of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives among undergraduate social work students in a formal post-secondary setting. Humanistic adult education and andragogical principles foster self-directed learning among adult learners in formal post-secondary settings.

Individual and group experiential learning situations that are promoted by traditional Aboriginal teachers also allow for self-directed learning and incorporate the values of non-interference, non-competitiveness, sharing, and a sense of personal and community responsibility.

Mainstream educational ideologies, methods, and cultural perspectives were modified by incorporating traditional Aboriginal ideologies, methods and perspectives. The blending of the two ideologies and methodologies provided grading methods which met the identified objectives of the mainstream institution.

The traditional Aboriginal methods which enhanced the learning experience for the students were the experiential learning that resulted from participation in sharing circles, storytelling, and participation with the Elders. The mainstream methods which encouraged self-direction and met institutional guidelines were the annotated bibliographies, the article critiques, the field trip, and the class presentations of the field trip. These methods provided an avenue for the students to become self-directed and to incorporate the traditional Aboriginal concepts of non-interference and non-competitiveness.

Structured learning activities and sharing circles — which drew upon the personal life experiences and professional issues of the adult learners — led to a deeper understanding and a meaningful integration of theoretical concepts for the adult learners. Also, the structured learning experiences and the blended use of sharing circles led the adult learners to examine their personal values. In addition, the annotated bibliographies, article critiques, and field trips facilitated self-directed learning because these activities were flexible enough to allow the students to research areas of special personal interest to themselves, within the diversity of professional issues.

The traditional Aboriginal teaching approaches may be more effective when they are facilitated by Aboriginal teachers who understand and practice those approaches to learning. My role as an Aboriginal adult educator in the classroom may have fostered a clearer understanding and provided a role model for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Certainly, the field visits to Aboriginal social service organizations and the class presentations of those organizations resulted in the discussion and personal challenging of previously held stereotypes regarding Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal

professionals, and Aboriginal helping practices among the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social work students.

Another insight arising from the projects was that Aboriginal perspectives and values were enhanced when Elders and other Aboriginal role models were included in the classroom situations. I believe that an Aboriginal facilitator can promote increased understanding of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives and enhance the learning process, but I also believe non-Aboriginals can also be effective — provided they first seek to enhance their own ideological understanding of Aboriginal peoples' and second incorporate Aboriginal resource persons into their learning activities. Based on these conclusions I offer the following recommendations.

Recommendations

These recommendations are directed to adult educators who are interested in facilitating an enhanced understanding of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives in formal post-secondary settings or to those adult educators who are searching for a blend of mainstream adult educational methods of facilitation and traditional Aboriginal teaching or learning approaches. The recommendations also may be of interest to adult educators who are searching for a means of defining a clearer understanding of how to facilitate their own learning experiences within their own cultures or in cross-cultural settings.

I suggest that adult educators consider how their own personal educational experiences, beliefs, and values may influence the adult learners they teach. I strongly suggest that adult educators identify their own personal and professional ideologies, because defining those philosophies may promote an examination of personal biases and potential ethical dilemmas or value conflicts between the adult educator, the adult students, colleagues, and the employing institution. This enhanced understanding can provide adult educators with increased confidence, which improves facilitation skills, and an appreciation of alternative methods of facilitating learning.

I suggest a blend of humanistic adult educational methods, self-directed learning concepts, and traditional Aboriginal teaching/learning approaches to develop an enhanced understanding of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives in formal post-secondary settings. In addition, I recommend that there be a focus on experiential learning activities to promote the integration of cognitive and affective learning among students.

I suggest the blend of structured learning activities and sharing circles to guide the adult learners examining their personal and professional biases in other-culture situations.

I suggest that other adult educators consider incorporating Aboriginal resource people, such as Elders, professionals, and community members, in courses which are intended to present an Aboriginal perspective to students in formal post-secondary educational settings. In addition, I recommend that Aboriginal faculty be hired to provide role models for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Finally, I acknowledge the limitations of this study, and I recommend that other adult educators undertake similar studies to develop a broader base of empirical knowledge from which to facilitate an appreciation of other-cultures' teaching/learning approaches and that these approaches be incorporated into formal and informal teaching settings. There are many topics for further research. This study provides some insight into the facilitation of Aboriginal perspectives, but it also raises some unanswered questions.

Unanswered Questions and Ethical Implications

As a result of my thesis I have some unanswered questions which other adult educators may want to consider for further research. Although I have used a blend of teaching methods and approaches to facilitate learning in a formal post-secondary setting, I believe that traditional Aboriginal teaching and learning approaches have their own validity. For example: what can be done to foster traditional Aboriginal teaching approaches as a recognized, valued, and equal set of principles by mainstream educational institutions? Is it desirable to incorporate more of the traditional Aboriginal approaches into a formal setting? Will that incorporation demean those traditional Aboriginal approaches to learning or will they enhance the learning experiences for all students? Is the whole life and/or whole learning perspective an effective means of facilitating meaningful learning about other peoples' perspectives? Is it useful to establish more Aboriginal controlled elementary, secondary, or post-secondary institutions to ensure the preservation of Aboriginal perspectives, or could this lead to a segregationist approach to life and learning?

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